



## **Playing With Wolves**

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## READING

The Monster of Grim Prospects  
By Trebbe Johnson

The two sides of us, one that would leap ahead into its destiny and one compelled by the fearful monster of grim prospects to keep things safe and under control, are clearly depicted in the tale of Orpheus. We see Orpheus ascending from the Underworld, step by careful step, as Eurydice follows close behind.

Now that his perilous journey is almost at an end, he considers what he has been through. Standing at the threshold of that dark kingdom from which no one ever returns, he was plagued by fears. What will happen to me? Will she really be there? Will she be changed? Will we escape? Yet on he went, enchanting the ferry man of the dead with his sweet music and making his way through the ghosts, finally presenting himself boldly at the throne of Hades to sing his love for Eurydice and plead that she be allowed to live again.

Astonishingly, it worked. Moved by this lover's plea, the lord of the underworld decreed that Eurdyce could return with Orpheus but with one stipulation: he must lead the beloved and not turn around until they reach the bright light of the living.

Now, so close to home that the birdsong begins to waft down toward him, Orpheus' heart is filled with joy. In moments Eurdyce will be in his arms again.

Then something terrible happens, something more insidious than any of the actual, grave dangers that attacked him as he groped along those loathsome walls, something more persistent than the fears that tried to turn him back from those dangers. A little apprehension pinches at him. Maybe she's not really with me after all.

It grows, this niggling qualm, until it has expanded from a twitch of possibility into a likelihood so huge and vivid that, finally, he is more preoccupied with it than with his urgent mission. And so he does the one thing that he absolutely must not do. He glances back over his shoulder.

Yes, Eurydice is there! And then, quite suddenly, she's not. She is gone forever.

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Wild Geese  
by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
Love what it loves.  
Tell me despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
Are moving across the landscapes,  
Over the prairies and the deep trees,  
The mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
Are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
The world offers itself to your imagination,  
Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –  
Over and over announcing your place  
In the family of things.

## SERMON

You could say that this story began early one very cold morning in the high desert of New Mexico. Deprived of the comfortable, warm cabin interior I'd just left, I huddled out in the wind, waiting. I brought my stiff fingers to my face and blew a warming breath on them. A light dusting of early winter snow painted the barren landscape a grayish white. It cast a dusty pallor that rendered the place unfamiliar, like the surface of the moon. Warily, I eyed the dark canine shapes moving in the near distance against the scrubby mesquite and creosote bushes. I stiffened in fear, my body recoiling from the sight of the wild wolves so near to me. Caught on the edge between going forward and turning back, I felt suspended. What was I thinking? I came to this place because I had been tracking a mystery, wanting to know why certain workplaces were toxic, and killed the creativity of people who worked there, leaving them drained, benumbed and walking wounded.

The question had led me to a larger reality: the omnipresence of fear – not only in the workplace but in the surrounding culture we live in. Fear is everywhere; it cuts off and dwindles perception, dissipates life energy. It leaves us feeling disconnected from the world, from each other and from the sources of our creative power. To deal with fear, many of us are resigned to a daily strategy of “peace at any price”: don't rock the boat, keep your head down, accept and tolerate the deadening environment while assuming that you are not also dying, and go along with the status quo. But the promise of a ready-made pattern in which to control fear and carefully fit your aspirations requires, over time, a costly trade-off: a false sense of security for the soul's integrity. Because the soul needs risk -- not to control the world but to play with it. By play I refer to an old Sanskrit word, *lila*, which is richer than our word and means “divine play,” the play of creation, destruction and recreation, and the play of God. Free and deep, it is both the delight and enjoyment of this very moment. It also means love. Play may be the simplest thing there is –

spontaneous, childish, disarming. But as we grow into our lives, it may also be the most difficult achievement imaginable. Thomas Moore believes that our souls yearn for divine play, on the threshold between the known and the unknown, between what is familiar and what is terrifyingly strange, and that this is the spiritual home of creativity. Paradoxically, it is also the claustrophobic place of our greatest fear. It takes considerable courage to stay as long as needed in such a threshold place and, as I learned in the high desert, it “requires a degree of holy foolishness to seek one out.”

Like a shadow, I could sense my fear always trotting along beside me, keeping the lid on, in control and away from the edge of risk. Stopping me in my tracks and signaling when to build up the defenses, the delay tactics, the control strategies. Or, to bludgeon that prickly sensation into submission with some form of distraction or denial. In the desert that morning, I felt far from home, seized by fear and an instinctive desire to go back to the protection of old habits. But, as Camus wrote, “in this moment we are feverish but also porous, so that the lightest touch makes us quiver at the depths of our being.” I looked into the stark empty space toward some unknown encounter and understood that the real question is not how do you avoid getting killed... but how boldly will you live? “Greet this fear and allow it to take you farther along, despite your certain belief that you will suffer and your long night will be lived forever. Life is lived along the dark edges – your creative spirit calls you here; surrender to your vulnerability. Whatever you can do or dream, you can begin it now. So I make a leap of faith across the threshold and step forward. I fall through and into a waiting world that demands I play with it.

Two large wolves charge at me, stopping within an inch of my face as I hunker down to give them a sparkle-eyed play look that says, “Hello. I am here in play; I will not harm you.” Making my body contours rounded, I hold my arms out to them. I have no

agenda, no goal or objective. I have only one clear intention that I hold firmly in my mind, to touch them with my heart in the free play of giving and receiving love. Remarkably, they do not eat me. They, too, suspend something in their beings and show willingness to encounter me in this way. And so, an invisible playground surrounds us. From the outside I appear to be a middle aged woman stroking some lively wolves and getting her faced vigorously washed by enormous tongues from their very toothy snouts. Wolf play. But inside the enchanted circle I have disappeared. All categories of wolf, woman, self and other are gone. I see no wolf. There is no wolf -- for that is a category of mind not the actual being here with me. And you can't play with a category. If I were thinking wolf, the wolf would have likely been thinking in a category of his own: food.

I do not will this act of play. I open my arms in total presence. Not weak or mushy, but with a fierce, steady heart that is clear. To really touch, with no intention of selling or getting something in return. I visualize a completely steadfast and powerful energy extending out of my arms and legs, connecting me with everything, like strong, fluid cables of color. I will not go away or avoid the frightening thing but confront it in new awareness, taking back all fear and reaching for a clear, unobstructed transmission of love and compassion. Extended and rooted in complete presence, the rest of my body moves fluidly. I am playing. Leading with my belly and not my mind, I discover a visceral gateway to a half-forgotten meeting place deep within my soul. I feel a complete satisfaction that recalls me to my ancestors who routinely lived in rhythm with the natural world. I have no aim other than to scamper and play until we feel like stopping to rest. I let go of fixed notions or rules, accepting the stricter, deeper rules of life in spiritual balance. It is exhilarating. This joy we share sweeps the space clear of fears, worries, preoccupations. Fear, my constant companion, is gone.

But now, the high desert wind has frozen my fingers past the point of forgetting, forcing me to notice the pain that comes back into my awareness. Just then a gentle illusion drifts across my mind, a subtle separation in my presence: “why these actions of mine,” I think, stroking the furry wolves, “they feel so familiar to me. Oh yes, of course – I am really just petting them and they are really just like dogs.” This is not true. They are wolves. As if they know I’ve forgotten, fleetingly diverting my attention into some category of thinking, the wolves suddenly swing around and – in an instant – attack. I had not noticed another wolf that had sneaked past and grabbed my wolf’s bone while we were playing. Now the two rushed violently at each other, snarling and locking their teeth into each other’s throats, going for the kill.

I am surrounded as all the wolves in the pack spring to tense alertness. I expect to recoil in terror and fear but strangely I feel none, even as I witness the escalating fight just a few feet away. Though the space as has shifted violently, I feel completely calm. Our play has altered my thoughts, centering my focus on the still point of connection that is alive with feeling and still pulsing through me. Everything has a crystal-like clarity and beauty. My first thought is a revelation: This is not my fight. To join in their struggle would be to claim a place in the wolf pack where I clearly did not belong. I would be acting out of an illusion that I shared some special place because of our play and was no longer a stranger. Such arrogance would have made the situation more dangerous. Especially for the wolves as then I would be another element in the attack. It was so clear: in a flash I knew it without thinking. Then came my second thought: I should leave now.

I discovered that I couldn’t be their playmate and have a cultural role at the same time. Certainly in whatever culture you live, you can step in and do what is needed, but the key is to do them with the compassion and clarity of play. Playing says “I trust.” Imagine if you could transfer this receptivity, compassion and free flow of play to everyone and everything you touched. Simply

to give and receive and expect nothing in return? Soon I would be playing with the wolves again, calming their agitation with compassion. I would get another hug and face washing from the very wolf that tried to rip the face off a rival an hour earlier. Play would awaken deep patterning and instincts of my own, spontaneously signaling what to do, when to stay, and when to leave. It would not matter that I had just witnessed the realities of the wolves’ predatory, killing instincts. I would release that violent image and sure knowledge of their destructive power, I would open my body space to them once again and slip into realness.

Since then, I have faced and played with many wolves. Not just the real ones in the desert but those that keep appearing and reappearing in my work and life. They bite at my confidence with snarling accusations that I couldn’t possibly know what I am talking about, correcting my mistakes with new and improved categories for what and how to do and be. Like those whose work puts them at the highest risk for stress-related illness, I work in a highly controlling culture that demands much but me gives few opportunities to act freely and make my own choices. When the game at work takes away personal power and teaches helplessness, the body’s vital reactions actually slow down or eventually collapse. Under chronic stress, hormones no longer ebb and flow but stay in abnormally high, repressing the immune system to ward off toxins. It is no wonder that work can kill.

In my study of the toxic work environment, I was fortunate to meet Stuart Brown, a psychiatrist who had interviewed dozens of mass murderers, including Charles Whitman, the man who climbed the Texas Tower one day and opened fire on an unsuspecting public below. The common element that he found in mass murderers and also from drunk drivers who killed themselves in accidents was not a history of abuse as commonly suspected. It was a chronic lack of play. It had not ever been a part of their lives. People who are severely play-deprived are toxic

– to themselves, to their bodies, to their families and to others. Stuart found that play is a high indicator of health in any system.

Now, for some people, what Stuart calls the consummate player, work is play and play is work. They gravitate toward those environments where they are given a clear sense of direction and then are empowered to design and carry out what is needed. They know how to find the little openings for play in the flow of work and then stretch those magical moments until they blend with the energies around them. Even in the worst situations, these players have a way of taking all the crassness and stupidity of the world and make it an occasion for play. They understand that is not control that is important, which is the legacy of games, but dynamic connection – relationship. High performers play at a high level of risk, and find ways to express their awe and spiritual wonderment, to live life along the creative edge needed for re-generating vitality.

Getting grabbed by a wolf or a life experience can take place at any time, physically or verbally. But the consummate player knows the secret: you can always choose whether it is an attack or a play opportunity. When you choose that it is not an attack, the attack stops and that is an incredibly powerful way to be in the universe. Always alert to the possibility of getting hurt, we mistake the fear for what is real and perceive a threat where there is none, withdrawing for protection or in anticipation of an attack. But what we pay attention to always attracts energy; truly you always have the power to choose that this is not an attack but merely another play opportunity. Change your perception and the attack ceases in that moment of clarity. Or maybe the attacker tries again, but you are so completely present that there is nothing to catch on and grab you for you are undivided from your soul's integrity, with a fierce, steady heart that is clear and ready for a complete encounter. Not in self-defense but in self disappearance which is the essence of play.

This direct, eye-level relationship with “the one who is other and also yourself” pierces opaque illusion created for protection born of fear – fear of discomfort or pain, of suffering anew, or the deeper, unsettling voices that threaten to awaken illusions of the costly peace that was negotiated within a divided self. Fear can bring tremendous doubt about the value of our life, our work and artistry. We need comfort and safety, but often try to keep fear at bay by splitting off and casting out what is “other” to protect ourselves at the same time that we walk through the world feeling alienated, disenchanting and toxic to ourselves and others. And so we also yearn for community with the other because we know that with it we would feel more at home in our lives, no longer a stranger. Creativity demands that we play with that paradox. In kinship with the elemental energies of the world, we encounter the other that is free to be itself and to speak its own truth, to tell us what we might not wish to hear, whether wolf, human companion, or self-dissenting voice within.

Since the wolves, I have been intent on a spiritual practice of play. It is liberating, exhilarating, devastating and terrifying. In the face of my greatest fears, as those great toothy snouts in my face so dramatically taught me, I am working on becoming completely present to whatever greets me, without an agenda or set of expectations in return. The secret is all in how you perceive things. All kinds of choices are available when you embrace the wolves waiting for you just around the corner or out in that desert. The spiritual energy you seek, on the other side of fear, is always available to use for transforming your perception and the perceptions of others. Once you do that, the kind of energy you give out to the world has fundamentally changed. You may begin to explore the free play of creativity as one with ordinary, daily activity now invested with luminosity, depth, and the simplicity-within-complexity that we associate with inspired moments. Divided no more, you become a true peacemaker. For peace is not the absence of violence but is the presence of wholeness. When we find wholeness, we come to know that one cannot

separate the self from the world because the individual affects the world and the world affects the individual. In the spiritual practice of play, our most rejected, violated, and alienated projections and fears can be reconciled. We can respond to the cries of the world by committing differently to our lives and each other. We will reach past fear and begin to accept the myriad potentially transformative invitations that come to us, like the wolves, asking for our loving attention.